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SUBJECT: BURMESE PRESS COVERS USG RICE DONATION

Ref: Rangoon61

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The Embassy Rangoon Charg d'Affaires, Embassy staff, World Food Programme (WFP) representatives, and local journalists traveled to four villages in the Irrawaddy Delta on April 1 to observe distributions from a shipment of 16,620 metric tons of USG-donated rice to survivors of Burma's Cyclone Nargis and to talk with beneficiaries about their priorities for recovery. Five local privately owned Burmese newspapers ran complimentary stories about the USG donation, as did international press (including Reuters, Straits Times, and Xinhua) and Burmese-language Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) radio. The State-run MRTV television station accompanied on the trip but as yet has not run a story. End summary.

A VISIT TO THE DELTA

¶12. (SBU) As part of the United States response to Cyclone Nargis, the USG pledged to donate 16,620 metric tons of rice (valued at USD 16 million) to affected communities. The rice shipment, which arrived in Burma in February, currently is being distributed by WFP to some 350,000 beneficiaries in the Delta. Some of the rice is being distributed under food-for-work projects to support the rebuilding of roads, dikes, and water ponds.

¶13. (SBU) On April 1, the Charg d'Affaires, Embassy staff, the WFP country director, and six local journalists traveled via UN helicopter to the Delta to observe the rice distribution and speak with beneficiaries. The accompanying journalists were from two local newspapers (Eleven News and English-language Myanmar Times), Reuters, and the state-run Myanmar News Agency and MRTV television. The group visited a WFP regional office in Labutta city and three small farming villages in Bogue and Labutta townships. The region is still not back on its feet. Farmers had a poor harvest last November and they lack access to credit to buy sufficient seed to plant a full crop next month when the monsoon arrives. Villagers recounted how the cyclone devastated their lives (in one village, 70 percent of residents died) and asked for continued assistance. All were aware, and very thankful, that the USG has been providing them aid.

MEDIA COVERAGE

¶14. (SBU) Local media coverage of the trip was surprisingly good, considering the historical reluctance of the Censor Board to approve coverage of Embassy activities - particularly high-profile events (Reftel). Four privately-owned Burmese-language weekly newspapers ran articles, all with photos of the Charge and/or villagers surrounded by USAID-branded rice bags. The privately-owned English-language Myanmar Times did not run a photo, and wrote "Delta Residents Grateful for WFP Assistance" in the headline rather than "USG assistance" (probably to ensure passage by the Censor Board),

but did place the very positive article on the front page. The editor of Burmese-language Flower News told us that the Censor Board initially would not let him print three color photos, but backed down after he protested. VOA, RFA, and DVB radio covered the event, using audio clips that we provided. A number of outside media organizations, including AP, Straits Times, Xinhua, and Mizzima also ran stories. We are sending a more detailed summary of press coverage via email to EAP/P and EAP/PD.

COMMENT

¶5. (SBU) The prominent press coverage of the USG rice donation and Delta trip and the willingness of the Censor Board to approve such coverage are encouraging. We were pleased that MRTV joined the trip, though it may be that, subsequently, State TV has had second thoughts about broadcasting a story that puts the United States in such a good light. Nevertheless, media coverage of the generous and caring rice donation and other U.S. assistance to Nargis victims has reinforced the U.S. image to the Burmese public as a force for good here.

DINGER